

CONGRUENT VISIONS  
Community in Covenant, Wisdom, Prophets

Man must pursue things which are just in the present, and leave the future to the divine Providence.

(Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, xxi.11)

The mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small;  
Though with patience he stands waiting, with exactness he grinds all.

(Longfellow, *Retribution*,  
trans. from Friedrich von Logau, *Sinngedichte* III.ii.24)

One of the most blasphemous consequences of injustice, especially racist injustice, is that it can make a child of God doubt that he or she is a child of God

(Bishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, quoted in Plantinga 2002, 119)

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ecce nova facio omnia.*

Behold! I make all things new.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ (xxi.5)

**Abstract**

It is customary in biblical studies to separate the covenantal, proverbial, and prophetic materials. Briefly surveying each corpus, this paper shows that they present a single and unified vision of the community of the Kingdom of God—a community characterized by *justice* and its consequences, viz., security, peace, and the common weal—the welfare of every individual within that community. This harmony, the great continuity among the biblical visions of the Kingdom, reveals that the God who established the covenant, inspired the wise, and spoke through the prophets is deeply and eternally concerned with justice, a justice that grows out of his very person and reflects his ongoing work in the world and reveals the end toward which he is moving all things.

## Introduction

What is valued in the Kingdom of God? How can we determine what, if anything, is most (or at least more) important? This paper suggests that when we examine the various iterations of the covenant found in the Pentateuch (Ex – Dt), the proverbial sayings of the wise (Pr), and the sermons of the prophets (Is – Ma), we find several common themes from which we may indeed infer a hierarchy of concerns and values, and further asks what these might imply for the Church. This paper addresses one of those concerns.

## Covenant<sup>1</sup>

The terms “contract” or “agreement” raise certain expectations in the hearer. Relevance theory suggests that interpretation or understanding comes when we filter what we hear and read through our experience, rather than from parsing the linguistic content of the words and statements themselves. When someone mentions a contract between a builder and an individual or family we expect that the main concern of the contract will be the construction of a house (or other building), and that it will specify dates for payments and inspections, as well as a deadline for completion of the project. If we have had any experience working with a contractor, we can probably describe or sketch the basic outline of the contract, even without seeing it. In the same way, hearing that someone has signed a contract of employment leads us to expect that it will mention such matters as the new employee’s responsibilities, as well as the employer’s promise to fulfill certain conditions, such as a salary (and its payment schedule), and such benefits as insurance, retirement, vacation, sick days, &c.

When we come to the covenantal materials of Scripture, we who are in this room have enough background to know what to expect: divine demands and promises, expectations and self-obligations (perhaps even resembling, or sounding like, an employer-employee contract). And we further expect those divine commands to concern the relationship between the subjects of the contract (in this case, the people of Israel and YHWH their god), what we might label the law “of the cult”—the religious obligations of the people toward their god. This is, of course, what we find.

The “Decalogue” of Exodus 20.2-17 begins like a list of fairly obvious ANE cultic obligations (20.2-11), but then becomes so non-cultic that its second part is commonly referred to as the “second table” of the law,<sup>2</sup> which is entirely non-cultic, instead forbidding murder (13), demanding respect for one’s parents (12), and then forbidding in turn adultery (14), theft [presumably between human beings] (15), perjury (16), and covetousness (17). Nor, apart from the command to honor one’s parents, are any of these latter given a theological motivation or foundation, instead sounding like a minimal but normal human “legal” system.

After a brief narrative interlude (20.18-22), however, the covenantal contents return to the expected cultic material, reasserting the initial demand for fidelity to YHWH (23) and the architecture of altars (24-26). Perhaps the “legal” demands in 20.13-17 are an anomaly, merely a temporary aside from the really important religious stuff that precedes and follows them.

Following the “law of altars”, however, the “legal” material takes over, dominating a rather lengthy stretch of text (21.2-22.27; with the exception of 22.20, which parallels the first commandment (20.3)), until the covenant returns to cultic subjects (22.28-31), which is again a mere interruption, the juridicial case laws resuming for the first nine vv. of Ex 23.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the “Book of the Covenant” addresses further cultic issues (23.10/13-33).

If we were to “keep score” by assigning verses to one side or the other of this [recognizedly artificial] distinction between “cultic” and “legal” content, we would discover that the majority of the verses with non-narrative contents in the “Book of the Covenant” (Ex 20-24) address “legal” issues (the ratio is slightly more than three parts legal to two parts cultic).

Isn’t this somewhat counter-expectational in a religious covenant? If anything is primarily religious, certainly a covenant between a god and his people should be, or we might at least expect it to devote most of its attention to the divine-human relationship that is the reason for the covenant in the first place. This “edition” of YHWH’s covenant with Israel begins with that relationship, but most certainly does not pursue it for long. It rather takes an extensive

---

<sup>1</sup>Or “contract”, since today “covenant” seems to belong primarily to the “religious” lexicon.

<sup>2</sup>This term reflects a misunderstanding of the function of the two table[t]s: the list of “words” was not divided between the stone tables. There were two tables in light of the ANE treaty form that stipulated two copies of a treaty, one for each partner, so that they could each have their own copy for reference, and so that the two copies could be compared on a regular (usually annual) basis in order to ensure mutual fidelity to their obligations.

<sup>3</sup>We might extend this to 23.12, since the law of the sabbatical year is not (at this point) given a theological or cultic foundation.

“detour” (from the standpoint of those who anticipate a “cultic” covenant), returning to cultic topics only after dozens of statutes (“case-laws”) that address inter-human relationships, without reference to divine authorization or compulsion.<sup>4</sup> A longitudinal chart or diagram shows that these materials consist of long stretches of “legal” statements bounded and interrupted by cultic demands.

Perhaps this is an anomaly. What is the picture in the other covenantal materials?<sup>5</sup>

The contents of Leviticus feel much more like the sort of materials that we might expect in a divine-human covenant, being filled with laws concerning sacrifices, priests, ritual purity (and purification for those who become ritually impure, or unclean). This happy state of affairs lasts from the first verse of Leviticus until we encounter laws dealing with sexual relations (18.6-23), some of which have religious overtones (e.g., 21), followed—again, after a motivational hortatory discourse and some cultic rules (18.24-19.8), by laws concerning a method of harvesting that provides for the poor and foreign (vv. 9-10), as well as a number of laws that reiterate much of the “second table” (above).<sup>6</sup> After a few religiously-motivated statutes (vv. 19-22), we again find a list of “secular”<sup>7</sup> laws, both with and without explicit divine authorization (vv. 22-36), interrupted briefly by two religious ones (vv. 30-31).

Then, after laws that prohibit the worship of Molech, the god of Ammon (so 1 Kgs 11.7) and the use of mediums (20.1-8; cf. v. 27), the content turns once again to familial and sexual mores (20.9-21). The rest of the book, ch. 21-27, is nearly all cultic in content, addressing the priesthood (21.1-22.16), sacrifices (22.17-33), the religious calendar (ch. 23, 25), maintenance of the cultic center (24.1-9), and blasphemy (24.10-23) before turning to the overall blessings and curses of the covenant (ch. 26), ending with regulations concerning vows (ch. 27).

Leviticus, then, more closely fulfills our expectations of a divinely ordained covenant, addressing things that we expect all gods to be concerned with, viz., how their people can maintain the good will of—maintain their covenantal relationship with—their god. “Secular” and “legal” concerns interrupt this cultic material only briefly.

The mixture of narrative and covenantal materials in Numbers makes it difficult to characterize that book, but its covenantal statutes are largely cultic, concerned with the care of the tabernacle, responsibilities of priests, &c.<sup>8</sup> The only exceptions are the laws of vows (ch. 30), which are not explicitly religious in nature (unlike the statutes of Lv 27), the laws concerning inheritance that are established in response to the request of Zelophehad’s daughters (ch. 27, 36), and the establishment of cities of refuge in order to protect those guilty of manslaughter from blood-vengeance (35.9-34).<sup>9</sup>

Leviticus and Numbers are both, therefore, largely cultic in nature, with only occasional forays into the legal morass of human property and relationship. What of Deuteronomy, the covenantal formulary *par excellence*?

The ANE treaty-formulaic outline of Deuteronomy is well-known, and so I will not repeat it here, noting only the presence of the historical prologue (ch. 1-4) which is followed by a largely parenetic section (ch. 5-11) containing some covenantal directives *passim* (e.g., the repetition of the Decalogue (5.1-6-21), the *Shema* (6.4) and its associated materials (6-8)).

Once past the largely cultic concerns (Dt 12.1-17.7), the concern for social and legal justice again becomes a prominent part of a covenantal document. The covenantal stipulations address the issues of crime and punishment and the nature of testimony and evidence (17.8-12; 19.15-21), kingship (17.14-20); protection for the manslayer (19.1-10); murder (19.11-13); property rights (19.14); inheritance (21.15-17); rebellious sons (21.18-21); and many laws addressing specific issues of property and morality (22.1-30; 23.15-20, 24-25; 24.1-25.16). Much of the middle third of Deuteronomy (ch. 17-25) is concerned with such subjects.

Furthermore, when we come to the description of the ceremony on Mts. Ebal & Gerizim (Dt 27.1-26), we find only one “cultic” law—namely, the proscription of idolatry (15). The other eleven curses are addressed to those who dishonour their parents (16), steal (17), murder (24), commit incest (20, 22, 23) or bestiality (21) or violence (24), or

---

<sup>4</sup>It is very difficult to count these laws, since we cannot know whether, for example, the statutes concerning the “ox that goes” would have been considered one law with four parts (and two qualifications), or four separate laws.

<sup>5</sup>I will not examine every verse in Exodus, &c. in order to see whether or not it might be covenantal—in one sense, at least, everything in the book is covenantal, in that all of the contents of Exodus grow out of the relationship that Yahweh establishes with his people on the basis of his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Ex 3.6ff). For that reason, I am not considering the instructions for the Tabernacle, nor the “Cultic Decalogue (so-called) in Ex 34.

<sup>6</sup>Some of these, however, have explicit religious “backing”: “... [for] I am Yahweh [your God]” (vv. 10, 12, 14, 16, 18).

<sup>7</sup>I use the term in its etymological sense: “dealing/concerned with this world”, the world in which we live, as theological shorthand.

The usual sense of this distinction is invalid.

<sup>8</sup>Nu 3.1-6.27; 9.1-10.10; 15.1-31; 18.1-19.22; 28.1-29.40.

<sup>9</sup>The latter is given an explicitly religious/divine foundation (35.33-34).

even mislead the blind (18). Given the brevity of this list, which was apparently intended to serve as some sort of summary or overview of the covenant, it is striking that two of twelve curses specifically address the concern of justice:

Whoever warps [twists, perverts] the justice due a foreigner, orphan, or widow is accursed. (Dt 27.19)

Whoever takes a bribe to strike [down] an innocent person is accursed. (Dt 27.25)

Once again, we are faced with the theme of what is apparently “secular” justice in the context of (in this case) a patently religious event.<sup>10</sup>

Now, the common rubric is that the covenant includes three types of laws or statutes: those that I have been calling “cultic” (traditionally, “ceremonial”) and “legal” (traditionally “civil”), and those that are called “moral” (i.e., the Decalogue). One common explanation is that the covenantal relationship is founded upon the moral law (beginning from the two great commandments: “Love YHWH your god with all your heart, soul, and strength” (Dt 6.5), and “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Dt 19.18)) of the Decalogue, some of which are then expanded into ceremonial laws (dealing with the “first table” of the Decalogue) and civil laws (dealing with areas of life addressed by the “second table”).<sup>11</sup>

The significance of the presence of such a large amount of these “legal” materials in these covenantal contexts can only be assessed in light of the purpose of the covenant itself. One commonly alleged purpose (mentioned above) is that obedience to the covenant would set Israel “apart” to YHWH as his own people. Their way of life, including dietary regulations and sexual mores (to mention two that are prominent in Leviticus, for example), would distinguish them from the other nations—especially from the Canaanites whom they were to displace—and make them more acceptable to YHWH as his people, thus ensuring their continuance in the land. Fulfilling their cultic duties according to the divine design (e.g., the design of their altars (Ex 20.24-26), sacrifices (e.g., Lv 1-7, 16; Nu 28-29), priesthood (e.g., Ex 28, 39; Lv 8-10, 21-22; Dt 18), ritual purity (Lv 11-15), and religious calendar (e.g., Lv 16, 23, 25; Nu 28-29; Dt 15-16)) ensured the maintenance of their relationship with YHWH.

This much is true. The covenantal blessings include peace, prosperity, and harmonious communal living (Lv 26.6; Dt 28.3-6, 10), a life that will arouse the envy and admiration of all who see it, and that will draw the nations to Israel’s god (Dt 4.6-8) through the centripetal force of their happy example.<sup>12</sup>

It is also valid to say that the stipulations and standards of the covenant, both generally and in its particulars, portray for Israel (and for its readers since) the nature of the God who establishes those standards. The covenant addresses what YHWH is concerned to address; those standards which he requires also typify his own “behaviour” in relation to both his entire creation and his chosen people. It is thus good and right to read the covenant as a portrait, a revelation *sensus strictu*, of the heart of YHWH.

We will return to the covenant, but let us now turn to the book of Proverbs, as an exemplar of biblical Wisdom writing.

### Wisdom (Proverbs)<sup>13</sup>

As I have discussed at length elsewhere (Putnam 1996, “Overview”) the purpose of “The Proverbs of Solomon” is not to foster personal morality as an end in itself or as a means to a successful or happy life, but to teach young men of the upper strata of Israelite society how to live the kind of life that will establish and perpetuate a stable and well-governed

---

<sup>10</sup>Since these laws stipulate that difficult cases be “remanded” to a hierarchy of judges (e.g., Dt 17.8-12), who would carry out justice at the place that Yahweh [your] god chooses”, they are not, of course, “secular”, as that term is understood in the popular mind, but this merely reiterates that point that justice belongs to Yahweh, not to the human courts. They are merely his agents, without the right to claim more than a deputy’s authority.

<sup>11</sup>This has been a fairly standard interpretation of the covenant, and finds expression in, *i.a.*, Calvin, Luther, and many Protestant doctrinal statements, as well as in works on biblical and systematic theology, morality, &c. The literature on this subject is so vast to be far beyond the scope of even the most cursory survey.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Putnam 2005 (“Eschatological Utopias”).

<sup>13</sup>This is not intended to imply that the biblical Wisdom writings are confined to the Proverbs of Solomon, merely that I am limiting myself to that work for the purposes of this paper.

society. This is why, for example, so many of the sayings concern one's relationship to the king (e.g., 14.35; 16.13-15; 19.12; 20.2; 22.11, 29; 24.21; 25.2-7), and why the "valorous woman" of Pr 31 is also obviously rich, using and building her own wealth, as well as ordering her husband's household (i.e., why describe a wife who is desirable but unattainable?).

These young men are to pursue lives that will strengthen the nation and its people. Since they will be in positions of leadership, they are therefore implicitly encouraged to know a witness's character before accepting testimony in court (12.17; 14.5, 25; 19.28), and warned against causing or abetting the miscarriage of justice<sup>14</sup>, or using their wealth to oppress others (28.8), or squandering it on prostitutes (e.g., 29.3; cf. 23.27-28).

The king was responsible to see that justice was upheld by rulers who were righteous and honest; the claims of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings demonstrate that these concerns were common to ANE monarchs.<sup>15</sup> In Israel, the ability to do so was viewed as the particular gift of God (cf. 1 Kg 3.11-28), who uses wisdom to shield those who live in the fear of YHWH, guarding even the processes of justice so that their honor will be upheld (2.7-8). This view of royal judgment perhaps even colored popular Israelite understanding (cf. 2 Sam. 14:20; although the Tekoite woman was probably flattering David).<sup>16</sup>

Further, in the prologue (Pr 1-9) Wisdom herself claims that she is indispensable to good government, since she is the source of all good advice, fruitful planning, insight, and strength (8.14-16), and tells her students that they should always choose the road that leads to righteousness and justice, because that is the road that she travels upon (8.20-21): her paths are characterized by righteousness and justice (cf. v. 14), the foundation of good government (e.g., 18:5; 19:28; 20:8, 26, 28).

Without belabouring this point, let me mention a few vv. in passing.

Proverbs 11.10 links the strength and glory of a nation or people to the character of its justice, and is closely related to several other proverbs on justice (28:12, 28; 29:2), as well as to the general theme of leadership (cf., e.g., 29:12, 14). The populace rejoices when the just prosper, because that shows that justice prevails. Their response to the conviction and eradication of the guilty is even stronger, if possible—shouts of triumph, as if over a vanquished foe. The people know that it will go well with them to the extent that justice prevails. To anticipate our conclusion, as the standards of the covenant are upheld, so goes the nation, and everyone in it (Lev. 26; Deut. 28).

As Pr 14.5 shows, character is a primary issue when weighing witnesses' testimony (12:17). Those to whom lying comes as naturally as breathing are likely to be perjurers, so that their testimony should be discounted, whereas those whose deeds and lives have proved the worth of their words are trustworthy. Future judges must therefore know the accused and their accusers well enough to judge the validity of their testimony and so uphold justice.

The "proud" are condemned in Pr 15.25a for trying to take advantage of the weakness of the poor (as the parallelism suggests). Since YHWH himself defends the helpless (22:22-23; 23:10-11), the plots of the wealthy and arrogant set them against him. This verse encourages future judges to align their sense of justice with YHWH's, so that they are neither led astray by the power of the proud, nor despise the poverty of the widow.

Bribes (15.27) are a violent perversion of justice (17:23; 29:4), but those who hate the violence perpetrated by injustice (and therefore hate bribes) are safe, because they are innocent of anything that might cause them scandal (10:9) or trouble. Under the covenant, perjurers were punished by the sentence that fit the accusation (Deut. 19:15-21). This verse may imply that someone who bought or forced false testimony would be equally culpable—their violence rebounds on their own heads (cf. 26:27).<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>The condemnation of the miscarriage of justice is especially prominent in the second half of Proverbs (e.g., 17:15, 23, 26; 18:5; 19:28; 24:23-26; 28:21; 29:7, 12, 14; 31:4-9).

<sup>15</sup>This can also be seen in some Egyptian "Instruction" texts, e.g., Merikare (*passim*), Amenemope 13, 16, 19-20, 28.

<sup>16</sup>The king was God's vice-regent, ruling under the covenant (Deut. 17:18-20). His primary responsibility was to administer justice (cf. Pr 20:8, 26; 2 Sam. 23:3-4). To support the wicked, whether physically, financially, or legally, would deny his rôle and violate the covenant (cf. Pr 25:5; 29:4, 12, 14). Thus Israel and Judah languished under many kings, who not only promoted or permitted paganism, but failed to rule justly (cf., e.g., Jer. 22:3, 13-17; Ezek. 22:25-29; 45:8-9; Amos 2:6-8; 5:24; Mic. 6:8). The root *qsm*, usually glossed to "divine" or divination", occurs once in an apparently positive sense (Pr 16.1). Pr 16.12, which is closely linked to v. 13 (cf. Pr 14:34-35), implicitly compares the royal role and standards to Yahweh's (the wicked are an "abomination" to both; cf. 15:9, 26; 16:5; 17:15).

<sup>17</sup>According to Pr 16.8 (where "righteousness" (8a) is better understood as "innocence"), acting uprightly, refusing bribes, seeking the truth without regard for the status of the claimants is better than getting wealth through wrongdoing. The pursuit of justice is always the wiser choice, since justice is demanded by the covenant, and therefore blessed (Deut. 28:1-13). This "better-than" proverb makes explicit the contrast implied in, e.g., 15:16.

Many other sayings demonstrate that justice is a major concern in “The Proverbs”,<sup>18</sup> for example, the idea that a king and nation would endure only insofar as he rules fairly by establishing justice in the land (14.34; 16.12; 20.28; 29.4, 14). If the king is good, his ministers will also be good (16.13), but if he is willing to listen to lies—to get advice from liars—all of his counselors will [eventually] become wicked, or be replaced by those who are willing to do or say whatever is necessary to gain the ear of the king (29.12), eventuating in national destruction (Pr 28.15, 16; 29.16).

The young men addressed by the Proverbs of Solomon were destined to become the leaders of their nation, its political, juridical, and military leaders. Their bearing and the manner of their lives, their choice to be honest (and perhaps poor) or wealthy (perhaps by bending the truth just a little), or to tell the king the truth, even at the cost of their own careers (but cf. 25.15), or to flatter him for [short-term] political or financial gain (28.23; cf. 26.23-28; 27.5-6), or to offer the counsel that will best serve the king and nation (11.14; 15.22; 24.5-6) would affect the nature of his kingship and the course of the kingdom.

The Proverbs of Solomon thus seek to motivate young men to begin making good and wise and morally upright choices *now*, perhaps even before they have begun to assume their adult responsibilities, so that they will advise the king, rule in his name, and judge with his authority in such a way that their rule, judgments, and counsel will strengthen the throne in righteousness, bring about justice, and foster peace in the land. We find the same concerns in the covenant (above)—there addressed to the entire nation, here in Proverbs to a much smaller and more select audience.

The proverbs do not encourage their students to pursue the goal of justice as an abstract ideal.<sup>19</sup> Justice itself is merely a means to a further end—the establishment and maintenance of a stable, peaceful society, one in which everyone expects justice, and no one fears exploitation or injustice, and in which mutual trust is not only possible, but normal, since all live alike under the rule of, and in obedience to, divine law.

Justice was thus not merely a “good idea”, it was seen as the foundation of an enduring kingdom. If there is no justice, or if “justice” is perverted by bribery, extortion, fear, perjury, or due to any other cause, the kingdom will fail, because a house “divided against itself” cannot long stand. The lack of trust that comes from the distortion of justice breeds cynicism, rebellion, and (if unchecked) anarchy, the antithesis of a sound government.

A “successful” or “morally upright” life was therefore not the primary concern of Solomon’s Proverbs, but rather a national [communal] life based on and patterned after the concerns of the covenant.

## Prophecy

The prophets were covenantal preachers, holding the kings (personally), and the nations of Israel and Judah (collectively) accountable to the covenantal standards, and by calling them to repent by returning their affections to YHWH, sometimes by pleading with them, but more often by warning them of the consequences of continued disobedience.<sup>20</sup> Again, rather than rehearse every prophetic reference to justice,<sup>21</sup> let me examine three passages (with their parallels).

First, the two big texts: Amos 5.24 and Micah 6.8, which are often cited or appealed to (1) as though they are the only prophetic (or even biblical) references to justice; and (2) as though they are references to some sort of abstract or “pure” justice that can be defined and applied to whatever situation lies to hand. This view of these texts is simply not valid. There are many condemnations of injustice (which are implicit calls to establish justice), including the preceding context of each of these verses. There are also a number of other prophetic passages in which YHWH demanded that the people of Israel or Judah (or both) act justly (see below). Without dismissing these two vv., I would like to look further into the prophetic corpus.

---

<sup>18</sup>Cf., e.g., Pr 8:15-16; 13:23; 17:15, 23, 26; 18:5; 19:28; 20:8, 26, 28; 21:14; 24:23-26; 25:2, 4-5; 28:5, 21; 29:2, 4, 7, 12, 14, 26; 31:4-9.

<sup>19</sup>This is not another *Republic* of Plato, an intellectual exercise seeking a society that could guarantee justice for all of its members.

<sup>20</sup>It is commonplace, following Wellhausen, to date many of the prophetic writings before the reign of Josiah and the discovery of the *torah*-scroll (2 Kgs 22), generally identified with Deuteronomy in part or in whole, but the assumption that the prophets were largely pre-covenantal (a conclusion that Wellhausen based on the lack of explicit reference to the covenant) has been strongly challenged (cf., e.g., Kitchen, 19??, ???, Wenham 19??, ???, *et al.*).

<sup>21</sup>Willem van Gemen lists seven prophetic “motifs”: the day of the LORD, the kingdom of God in creation, the Messiah and messianic kingdom, the Spirit of restoration, the new people of God, and Israel and the nations (1990, 212-244). {Where does justice fit????}

YHWH's statement in **Ezk 22.30** that he could not find anyone qualified to reduplicate Moses' earlier act of standing "in the breach" (cf. Ps 106.23; referring to Ex 32-33) often yields sermons calling for listeners to "stand in the gap". This is not, however, the point of this statement. Ezekiel 22.23-31 is instead a wholesale condemnation of the entire ruling class, as well as of the "people of the land" for their flouting of justice for the sake of gain. Working his way through the entire "caste" of leaders, Speaking through Ezekiel, YHWH condemns them all, concluding that there was no one able to turn aside the coming judgment (22.31). He denounces

... the *prophets* for robbery and murder (25)

... the *priests* for defiling the Temple and failing to teach Torah (26)

... the *rulers* for theft through violence (27) and the *prophets* for supporting them with false oracles in YHWH's name (28)

... the *people of the land* for extorting the poor and non-Judahites (29)

The point is simply that injustice was the order of the day, and for that Judah was doomed.

The leaders, religious and civil, were condemned because it was their recognized duty and responsibility to ensure justice throughout the land (cf. the condemnation of Samuel's sons (2 Sam 8.5)), but, far from establishing justice, they were abusing the judicial system and its religious support (through the prophets) in order to increase their own wealth, even at the cost of the lives of their fellow Israelites.<sup>22</sup>

Now, there is nothing new here. Ezekiel has already made the point<sup>23</sup>, and made it at great length, that Judah was so worthy of judgment for her religious [cultic] adultery<sup>24</sup> (including the sins of her leaders (Ek 11) and false prophets (Ek 13)<sup>25</sup>), that not even the most righteous person imaginable could turn aside the coming famine, wild animals, sword, or plague (Ek 14). Here, however, he condenses these condemnations into a few statements, telling the exiles in Babylon that the perversion of justice and abuse of social position, not "merely" religious failure, has brought about Jerusalem's destruction.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, throughout the minor prophets two related, but rarely parallel streams, describing and denouncing injustice<sup>27</sup> on the one hand, and, on the other, call for the pursuit of true justice<sup>28</sup>. This is the same call that we find at the beginning of Isaiah (1.16-23, 26), but in Isaiah it turns into a three-fold stream, not only commanding them to establish a just order<sup>29</sup> and describing their present injustice<sup>30</sup>, but also promising a reign that will be characterized by untrammelled justice.<sup>31</sup> I have examined this theme of promise in Isaiah elsewhere (Putnam 1995), and so merely summarize it here.

The clearest example of this coming justice is the picture of "the shoot of Jesse's stem" (**Is 11.1-9**). This "diptych" presents first a judge whose ability lies outside human experience. His verdicts and sentences are always perfectly suited to the case before him. Empowered by YHWH's manifold spirit—the spirit of wisdom and insight, of counsel and strength, of knowledge and the fear of YHWH (11.2)—he renders judgments uninfluenced by appearances or words (3), and he will do this even when confronted by a case involving the poor and afflicted (4). This gives rather a different slant on "blind justice"!

---

<sup>22</sup>This royal responsibility for justice is part of the reason for the condemnation of David (2 Sam 12), for Solomon's prayer and Israel's response (1 Kgs 3), for the Queen of Sheba's response (1 Kgs 10), and for the constant prophetic denunciation of leaders in Israel, Judah, and the nations. If the head is rotten, the entire tree must be destroyed.

<sup>23</sup>If we accept the dating system of the work itself, and assume that material between the dates was written or spoken between those dates, then Ek 22 was delivered in part or in whole between August 591 (20.1) and January 588 (24.1), two to four and one-half years after his call as a prophet.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Ek 8-9, 11, 13-14, 16-17, 20-23.

<sup>25</sup>In Ek 13.5, the false prophets are condemned for their failure to "go up into the breaches" (the same word found in 22.30). In Jerusalem, Jeremiah was also making the same point about false prophets (e.g., Jr 14, 23, 27-28).

<sup>26</sup>Cf. the close parallels in Mi 3.9-12; Zp 3.3-4; Jr 2.8 (but also the implicit contrast with Moses (Ps 106.23)).

<sup>27</sup>Cf., e.g., Am 2.6; 4.1; 5.4-7, 10-13; 6.12; Mi 2.1-2; 3.1-3, 9-12; 4.1-5; 6.9-12; 7.1-6; Hb 1.2-4; Zp 3.3-4; Zc 7.1-10; Ma 2.17.

<sup>28</sup>Cf., e.g., Ho 12.7; 5.14-15, 21-24; Mi 6.6-8; Zp 2.3; Zc 8.16; Ma 3.22 [ET 4.4].

<sup>29</sup>Is 56.1; 58.1-12 (cf. Ek 45.9 and its location!).

<sup>30</sup>Is 3.12-15; 5.7b-8, 23; 10.1-4; 59.1-8, 11-17.

<sup>31</sup>Is 2.1-4 (the parallel in Mi 4.1-5 is the only example of this "stream" that I have found in MP); 9.5-6 [ET 6-7]; 11.1-9; 26.8-9; 28.5-8; 29.19-21; 32.1-8, 15-20; 33.5, 13-24; 42.1-9; 61.1-3.

The passage then describes a perfect world—harmonious, peaceful, and fear-free. This order (justice – peace) is *not coincidental*. Justice is the necessary condition of true safety, peace, and harmony. Without the perfect judge described in vv. 1-5, the world pictured in vv. 6-9 could not exist.

Ignoring any attempt to establish a schedule for or the exact nature of their fulfillment, or even to suggest which texts should or should not be labelled “messianic” or “eschatological”, other Isaianic passages also promise a day in which justice will be universally realized (Is 2.1-4; 26.8-10; 29.19-21; 42.1-9; 61.1-3)<sup>32</sup>. The point is not to figure out the precise referents of all of these statements, but rather to ask what their presence signifies or suggests about YHWH who spoke them through his prophet.

In other words, we expect to read prophetic denunciations of religious malpractice.<sup>33</sup> And in fact, the prophetic writings are filled with such charges against Israel, Judah, and various ANE nations and peoples.<sup>34</sup> What we may not expect to meet, however, is the insistence that they pursue justice as an aspect of covenantal obedience, and promises (or perhaps warns) them that true justice, justice of a kind that they have never imagined, is coming upon them and upon the whole earth.

## Congruence & Conclusions

What is the point of this rather lengthy rehearsal, little of which has been (I suspect) new information to “professional biblicists” such as are here today. I submit that we find complete congruence between the prophetic and covenantal visions, and that these are fully congruent with the type of leadership described in the Proverbs of Solomon. What does this congruence suggest?

1. Justice is a *biblical* (i.e., not merely prophetic) theme.<sup>35</sup>
2. A concern for justice is a natural and therefore necessary corollary of a *covenantal relationship* with YHWH.<sup>36</sup> The covenant envisions a society whose members live consciously *coram Deo*, where that understanding of their existence not only informs but instructs and guides their every decision, where each watches out for the welfare of his neighbour, and his donkey or ox, where no one need fear that her daughter will be attacked or misused, and where—when disputes arise—everyone knows that justice will be done for all concerned.<sup>37</sup>
3. The notion of *abstract* justice is *foreign* to the Bible. Justice is always justice “with regard to” some particular instance in the life of an individual or group. Amos and Micah did not reason their way from through to the need for justice. Their demand grows out of the covenantal expectation that justice would characterize YHWH’s people because it characterizes him. Regardless of how it may appear, this is not a statement about “*natural law*”, but rather about the covenantal basis of *biblical law[s]*, which has as its foundation the person and nature of the God himself.
4. The call for justice reveals the character of the God who commands its pursuit: he plays no favourites, nor is he swayed by personal appearance, abilities, status, or by threats, bribes, or any other circumstance. He is absolutely, inexorably, unfailingly just.

---

<sup>32</sup>The closest parallels to these statements, though very different in form and imagery, are found in the psalms, where Yahweh comes to establish justice (e.g. Pss 96.13; 98.9), a consequence of his coming which is celebrated by the entire non-human created order (e.g., Ps 96.12; 98.7-8; cf. Is 55.12).

<sup>33</sup>Many readers perhaps expect to encounter denunciations of the kind of immorality that Dorothy Sayers laments is the only thing that people today think of when they hear the word “sin” (19??, ??).

<sup>34</sup>They also address other concerns, but these are not germane to my purpose.

<sup>35</sup>We could also examine the many individual laments in the Psalter, all of which (always with the exception of Ps 88) expect Yahweh to judge uprightly, so that the psalmist will be exonerated.

<sup>36</sup>This conclusion could be expanded to include the idea that justice is a reflex of human creation *imago Dei*, and also suggests that the biblical concern for justice is not to be explained as a mere reflex of ANE law codes.

<sup>37</sup>This may further imply that a system that is recognizably a source and means of genuine justice ought to be a primary goal of human government.

5. The prophetic materials—the stories describing the ministries of the non-canonical prophets as well as the canonical works themselves—need to be read and understood in light of the juridical requirements of the covenant. The requirements, promises, and threats of that covenant are the foundation upon which the prophets build, as well as the mortar that shapes their message; a vision for the community described in that covenant is that which they sought to kindle in the hearts, and renew in the lives of their hearers.
6. To make biblical theology normative rather than merely descriptive,<sup>38</sup> if justice is a major *biblical* theme, not merely a prophetic one, or one that is determined by one’s political orientation, then we must conclude that it is also a *divine* concern.<sup>39</sup>

Justice is the foundation of a stable society. Rightly carried out, it ensures internal stability, peace, and security. If criminals know that they will be convicted, sentenced, and punished, and if citizens know that they need fear no miscarriage or misapplication of justice, then all can be secure, free from the worry that something wrong is about to be perpetrated against them.

And the relative stability of a life lived in security and peace—a consequence of covenantal obedience and submission—is both an eschatological vision and a definite [defined] goal promising that “Every man shall sit [dwell] beneath his vine and fig tree with no cause for fear” (Mi 4.4; Zc 3.10)<sup>40</sup>. The call to “choose life, that you and your sons may live ...” (Dt 30.19) is thus an invitation to enable the *people of God*—the national community—to endure.

7. This biblical concern for justice helps us understand James’ definition of true religion that pleases God as “visiting widows and orphans in their distress ...” (Jas 1.27) not as dropping by for tea, but with watching over and caring for them (the positive meaning of the Hebrew root *pqd*), with working to ensure that they receive justice.<sup>41</sup>

Time does not allow us to explore the rôle or function of these various “biblical utopias” (as we might call them) in the life of the Church, other than simply to say that each one—covenant, proverb, prophecy—sets before us a vision<sup>42</sup> of a world that could be, and that—in the course of the redeeming and renewing work of God—shall yet be. These visions help explain why, e.g., the covenant was recorded and preserved (when much else that was good—and even very good—has perished), why a book designed for a certain limited portion of Israelite society has also been preserved, and why we still have and read prophetic sermons composed and addressed to another people far away and long ago.

Nor should we “lay waste our powers” (Wordsworth) on eschatological schemas. This paper suggests that such are not the purpose for which these things have been preserved. Once again, to move from description to normative theologizing (and *pace* Vonnegut’s concerns about “realized eschatology”), such a great divine concern ought also deeply to concern his people, so that we ourselves become agents of God, fighting injustice (in whatever venue) and fostering justice (wherever we discover allies) for the sake of Christ.

*fcj*  
Lent MMVI

---

<sup>38</sup>The terms are common in the debate about the scope and function of OT theology; cf., e.g., Martens 1999, 172.

<sup>39</sup>Academic papers are not confessionals, but in order to make the abstract more concrete and perhaps encourage others to think more carefully, let me describe my own experience. From the beginning of my life of faith I was not comfortable with the idea that the Bible really addressed human justice, having been taught to regard the covenant as “set aside” for the Christian, to “leave justice to God”, and to hold as suspect the theology [and politics] of those who were concerned for justice (since they were “missing the real point” of the Bible). Following the sincere [and misguided] counsel of trusted teachers, I dismissed those who thought otherwise until I began to seriously study the biblical books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah. It was then that I began to think and see differently.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. the implicitly “eschatological” claim of 1 Kgs 4.25 and Sennacherib’s counter-offer (2 Kgs 18.31).

<sup>41</sup>The root *pqd* [פקד] is frequently rendered in LXX by *evpiske,ptomai*, the term used by James that is generally rendered “oversee”, but here “visit”.

<sup>42</sup>I am not using “vision” in the sense of “divine message” or “communication”, but of something “set forth to view” or “made visible”.

## Question & Response

Q: What should we *do*?

R: As an **academic**—a member of *academe*—my responsibility is rather like that of an archaeologist, whose first uncovers what is there, and then cleans, photographs, describes, and exhibits it for all to see, and who does this so clearly that those who hear or read can understand, and that those who pursue such studies can fit that bit of information into the larger *shema*(s) of the human past. In fact, the biblical concern for justice is just that—a canonically ubiquitous *biblical* concern, regardless of, e.g., the provenance of the various documents of Scripture.

As a **churchman**, however (and I assume that this is the sense in which the question is being asked), it is my responsibility to say to the church that any concern that is as close to the heart of God as this must also be a grave concern to the church, to both individual congregations, and to larger groups, such as local networks, and national and international associations and denominations.

We here today might even ask what, if any, implications this theme has for the way that we as academic churchmen teach, study, discuss, grade, and carry on all the other duties of our office, but with that I have certainly moved far beyond understanding into meddling.

We might also ask a more disturbing question: is this even the best (i.e., the most helpful) question? Could we not ask, with perhaps greater benefit, what we should then be, or (at least) what we should be seeking to become? To practice justice, to love *hesed*, and to walk humbly with YHWH, in whom we live, move, and have our being, we must be those who understand justice, who can testify that we have experienced (and thus to some extent know) *hesed*; for either of these things to be true of us we must first—first!—pursue humility for the sake, and after the model, of Him who humbled himself for our sakes. When we have begun to become what we already are (with apologies to Josef Pieper), then perhaps we shall have begun to win the right to ask what—being people of the right “sort” or “kind”—we ought to do.

And may God have mercy on us all, to that end.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hallo, William W., & K. Lawson Jr.

1997,2000 *The Context of Scripture*. Vols. I-II. Leiden: Brill.

Martens, Elmer A.

1999 "The Flowering and Floundering of OT Theology" in *A Guide to OT Theology & Exegesis* (pp. 169-181), ed. Willem van Gemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Pieper, Josef

1989 *Josef Pieper: An Anthology*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Plantinga Jr., Cornelius

2002 *Engaging God's World. A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Putnam, Frederic Clarke

2005 "Living from the Future. Missional Implication of Biblical 'Utopias'". Paper read at ETS 2005.

1998 *Proverbs. The Complete Biblical Library. Old Testament Study Bible*. Springfield: World Library Press, 1998.

## I. “Justice” in Deuteronomy &amp; the Prophets

In the “opening” materials (Dt 1-11) that precede the covenantal stipulations proper (Dt 12-26), the noun *mišpat* refers primarily to “judgments” in the sense of “commandment”, “statute”, or “covenantal ordinance”.<sup>43</sup> Within the covenantal stipulations themselves—the “laws”, so to speak—its primary referent is the act of establishing justice—the function of the “justice system”, so to speak.<sup>44</sup> Its last four occurrences are evenly divided in both distribution and significance between the two lengthy poems with which the book closes, twice having the sense of “justice” (32.4, 41) and twice of “ordinance” (33.10, 21).

When the root *špt* [jpv] functions verbally in Dt, it always refers to the position of “judge” or to the act of administering justice,<sup>45</sup> whereas the noun *mšpt* [jpv], which is far more common, refers once to a “custom” (18.3), and primarily to the task and exercise of “justice” itself (15x), and the specific covenantal statutes [trad. “judgments”] (20x). Although this functional distribution of the lexical root *špt* is illustrative, it does not actually represent the true state of affairs.

Nor should we expect to find in the prophetic writings “Micah’s indignation against injustice” or “Amos’ holy wrath against social inequities” (e.g.) as the source of their message(s). The prophets were not their own men, but YHWH’s. They spoke their messages, not out of their own hearts, but as the mouth of God (cf. Ex 4.15-16; 7.1-2).<sup>46</sup> This is not to deny the timeliness of their words. Nor is it to deny the possibility, indeed probability, that they were deeply stirred by what they spoke against. I am merely making the point that they were not responsible for their messages, just as a modern preacher who attempts to be faithful to the biblical text is not, insofar as the sermon grows out of, or is shaped by, the text; the preacher’s responsibility is to bring *that* textual message into the lives of others, and into the surrounding world.

---

<sup>43</sup>With only two exceptions (1.16b; 10.18), its first sixteen (16) occurrences (those in Dt 1-11) refer to “judgment” in the sense of “statute” or “commandment” (Dt 4.1, 5, 8, 14, 45; 5.1, 31; 6.1, 20; 7.11, 12; 8.11; 11.1, 32).

<sup>44</sup>Two-thirds of its fifteen occurrences in Dt 12-26—the covenantal stipulations—refer to “justice” in the sense of “the act or exercise of brokering judicial decision(s)” (16.18, 19; 17.8, 9, 11; 19.6; 21.17, 22; 24.17; 25.1; 27.19); there are five exceptions (12.1; 18.3; 26.16, 17; 30.16).

<sup>45</sup>There are ten verbal occurrences of the root *špt* [שפט] in Dt, eight of which are substantive, or nominal, participles (1.16a; 16.18; 17.9, 12; 19.17-18; 21.2; 25.2), and two of which are [finite] verbs (1.16b; 25.1).

<sup>46</sup>For a discussion of the relationship between the divine commission and instructions and the prophet’s actual message, cf. 1 Kgs 21 (Putnam n.d.).

## II. The Goal of Justice (an essay)

The goal of covenantal justice is not restitution, nor is it punishment, vengeance, retribution, or the elimination of the criminal, even one who has committed a crime so heinous that death is the only suitable response. It is true that death by, e.g., stoning is a communal responsibility, and that this would certainly feel like punishment to the person being executed. And it is also true that many crimes, especially crimes of property, such as those found in the Holiness Code (Ex 20-23), entail restitution at prescribed ratios for, e.g., theft.

We must not confuse ends with the means by which we reach them. These acts of justice are neither ends nor goals, but means, and they are means to a far greater end than personal or familial vengeance or satisfaction, or the restoration of (or compensation for) property lost or stolen. Not even the death of someone who has committed a capital crime is commanded because death is somehow a punishment that “fits the crime” or “atones” for it, as if the wickedness of that crime was so great that one’s guilt could not be “bought off” with a fine or sacrifice. Nor was the goal (in the case of capital crimes) the purgation of such heinous criminals from the land. That too was merely a means.

Justice was crucial to the covenant, but only as a means, never as an end. To forget this is to lose the biblical perspective on justice.

The goal of the acts of justice—which is the same as the goal of obedience to any covenantal standard—was the preservation and well-being of the covenantal community, the nation of Israel. According to both chapters of blessings and curses, peace, health, and prosperity were the rewards of obedience (Lv 26; Dt 28). They were also the results of obedience. That is to say that the rewards were not separated from the consequences of the actions themselves, but were their natural outcome.

The punishment of offenders was motivated by three concerns: that Israel might remain in the land (national security; Lv 26; Dt 28), that others—outside Israel—might see and fear YHWH (“evangelism”; Dt 4), and that evil may be purged from the land (social stability and peace; Dt *passim*).